222 constitute staple foods, are gathered in great bulk, which
262 can be measured in tons, and these plants provide as regular a harvest of food as cultivated gardens. In Eastern Arnhem Land the most important of the staple foods are *ŋätu*, the fruit of a Cycad, two or more species of yam, one, a long yam called *gulläkku* (*Dioscorea transversa*) and a round
[252] yam *djitama* (*D. sativa*, var. *rotunda* etc.) which possesses a poisonous property which must be leached out after cooking, *kinipirri* (a wild *Taro*), very local in distribution, and *dirrpo*, water lilies, (*Nymphaea*) of several species, of which both seeds and rootstocks are eaten. In the coastal area, by far the most important staple food from the time the salt plains dry after the wet until the onset of the rains at the end of the dry season, is *rakai*, the small round corm of the Tall Spike Rush, which grows in great quantities, covering hundreds of acres of ground on the coastal plains, especially in areas subject to periodic flooding with brackish water. The corm of this plant is about the size of a hazelnut, and when eaten raw, has much the same flavour. *Rakai* is also
[252] cooked, and is prepared by roasting in hot ashes, when it is hammered with a wooden mallet into the form of a small cake resembling nut-meal of coarse texture.

252 The fruit of the Cycad, *ŋätu*, which was mentioned above, must be soaked for a period of from three to five days to leach out soluble poison which it contains. After this it is ground, moulded into a cake which may weigh several pounds, wrapped in a neat parcel in paperbark, and cooked in hot ashes, when it bears a resemblance to a very heavy, coarse, unleavened bread. Vast quantities of *ŋätu* are gath-
262 ered in the course of the year. It has the merit that, unlike
[251] most other foods of the aborigines which must be eaten immediately after preparation, it can be kept for some days or weeks. The fact that it is very abundant gives *ŋätu* a

9: Thomson E-5 (1935-1943)1949
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special value in native economy, for it enables the women to maintain an adequate food supply on ceremonial occasions when hundreds of people are gathered in one camp for weeks or months at a time, who could not otherwise be supported for such periods on local resources. *ŋätu* is also the principal food eaten in Arnhem Land on ritual occasions. After it has been received by the old men it is then dedicated ceremonially to the *räŋga*, the sacred totemic object, by the *Dälkarrämirri*, who recites aloud over it the "big" or sacred names of the totem. It now becomes sacramental food and may not be eaten or even handled by the profane, that is, by any but men fully initiated to the particular totem to which it has been dedicated.

Although, as was stated above, *ŋätu* can be kept, after preparation, for several days, the natives of Arnhem Land, in common with other Australian aborigines, do not store food, but are dependent for their subsistence on the result of each day's hunting. In Arnhem Land a single species of fruit, *mundjutj*, (*Buchanania Muelleri*), which is harvested in great quantity in the wet season, chiefly January and February, is sometimes spread out in the sun to dry until it becomes wrinkled and shrivelled like a prune. It is then distinguished by a separate name, *bindjitj*, from the fresh fruit, *mundjutj*. The method of preparation is as follows: After a preliminary exposure to the sun the fruit is rubbed with red ochre and again dried until it is hard and brittle, after which it is wrapped up neatly in parcels of teatree bark. In this form *bindjitj* may be stored for weeks or even months—a practice almost unprecedented among these nomadic hunting people. The subsequent preparation of *bindjitj* is carried out by pulverising the dried fruit, including the hard seed, with pounding-stones, wetting both fruit

252 and pounding-stone with water during the process. The dried fruit may also be prepared by soaking in water or it may be mixed with the pulverised flesh and bones of the Red Kangaroo, *kärritjämbäl*, into a kind of paste, in which form it is greatly relished.

251 The only other instance, in my experience, of an attempt by Australian aborigines to store vegetable food, was on Western Cape York Peninsula, where the fruit of the Nonda Plum (*Parinarium Nonda*) was stored in deep holes sunk in dry sand, where it was kept for some time. The desiccated fruit was then prepared in the same way as *Buchanania* was treated in Arnhem Land, by pulverising the fruit, together with the hard stone or kernel, with a pounding-stone and soaking it in water. The two examples quoted above are of considerable interest and are important economically, for they appear to represent the beginnings of the practice among a nomadic hunting and food-gathering people of conserving and storing food.

412 The implements and domestic utensils used by the women are simple but well made, in each case by a technique which is perfectly fitted to the material available. The most important and characteristic implement used throughout most of the Continent is the yam stick. In Northern Australia, this is made from ironwood (*Erythrophloeum Laboucherii*), varying in length from about three feet to five, or a little more, sharpened at one or both ends, the digging points hardened by fire. This serves both as an implement for [411] digging and as a weapon for the fighting in which women sometimes indulge.

415 Mesh baskets, as well as net or string bags of several types, each adapted to a particular purpose, are carried, and vary according to the chief food in season at the time. These 482 food baskets are slung across the shoulder and suspended